

Dear Mr. Principal:

As you are well aware, as a district we are currently required to use Lucy Calkin's *Units of Study for Primary Writing* as our writing curriculum. I was trained in this method of writing instruction 4 years ago by the district and at the beginning of my teaching career found this scripted curriculum very helpful in planning my lessons in each genre. However, each year that I have been teaching, I find myself branching further and further away from the mini lessons planned for each genre due to the needs of my students. While I do make sure to cover the main ideas of each unit of study, I have found that in order to help all of my students be successful and fully understand each genre, more lessons are required. The unit of study that I find myself supplementing the most for is the personal narrative unit. This is due to the performance of my students. Using the Calkin's approach, I find my students struggling to zoom in on one moment and an inability to add quality detail. Thus, I have spent the past few months studying narrative writing and planning supplemental lessons/materials that would help my students understand/write their small moment stories. I believe that by spending more time on prewriting, teaching students to set goals, utilizing more mentor texts, and teaching lessons on various ways to add detail will strengthen our district's students' writing.

One of the most common reasons my students struggle with personal narrative stories is due to writer's block. On a daily basis my colleagues and I hear, "I don't know what to write about." Comments like these tell me that students are going into workshop unprepared to write. "We need to help them see that although their adventures may be small, even the smallest can be worth writing about" (Hillocks, 2007, pg. 37). Our students have in their minds that stories need to be about exciting, dramatic events in order to be "good". Thus, I believe that before we can even begin utilizing Calkin's unit, first we teachers need to help students develop lists of possible ideas for stories from their lives so that they not only see their lives are full of small moments, but also to help them refer to their lists throughout the unit to alleviate the time our students spend staring off into space or talking with their peers because they don't know what to write about. I have created a list planning sheet for my students that I am attaching for your reference. It gives them some categories to help think of ideas, as well as a place to list others that they think of.

In addition to brainstorming possible writing ideas, research shows that drawing before writing improves the quality of one's writing. A study done by Jurand (2008), showed that when students used drawing during prewriting their scores for ideas, organization, and conventions increased (pg. 263). By drawing out the image in their minds, students are able to refer back to the image to include details such as the setting, who was there, and what was happening. Jurand Olshanksy (1995) finds that "drawing is one manner with which young students gather and

organize ideas for writing" (pg. 6). While Calkins does encourage students to draw before they write, I find that since the boxes where they draw their pictures are on the same page with the writing lines many students draw last or draw and write a page at a time. By giving students just pages of paper stapled together or just one piece of paper would encourage all students to draw their story. Then from the drawing, they would write out their story. A teacher from the study states that, "when my students drew before writing, I observed, they were less confused about what to write" (pg. 8) Thus, by using drawing as a prewriting activity, students would not only create higher quality pieces, but would waste less time not knowing what to write.

Once my students are set for writing, many of them often feel overwhelmed by all that is a part of a strong personal narrative. One way to help them overcome this is to utilize the idea of goal setting within our conferring sessions with students. According to Siegle, "setting and measuring goals is probably the most effective classroom modification teachers can make to increase student confidence" (paragraph 1). If a student feels more confident in their abilities, they are more likely to perform better. The most important thing with goal setting though, is that the students are creating their own goals (Flower & Hayes, 1981, pg. 373). The goals created by students should not be created only at the beginning of a unit, but rather throughout the whole narrative unit. "The act of developing and refining one's own goals is not limited to a "pre-writing state" in the composing process, but is intimately bound up with the ongoing, moment-to-moment process of composing" (Flower & Haynes, pg. 373). To address this, the conferring sheet I created and will utilize lists the dates of when a goal was created, evidence of working towards the goal, and when a goal is achieved. There are many lines because I assume a student will be working on many goals as their writing evolves throughout the unit. While the students will set many goals, they will be focusing on one goal at a time because it makes it easier for a student to reach and easier as a teacher to create teaching points to use when conferring with that student to help them reach their goal. According to Albert Bandura and Dale Schunk (1981), students that divide larger goals into smaller, more attainable goals, progressed rapidly in self-directed learning, achieved substantial mastery of skills, and developed a sense of personal efficacy and intrinsic interest in the task (pg. 587). By creating small, specific goals during conferring in our narrative units, our students will achieve more and feel more confident.

Another area that needs to more attention paid to it in order to make students feel more confident and be successful in writing is the use of mentor texts in the personal narrative unit. I strongly agree with Ralph Fletcher who says "that you need to see somebody doing something in order to do it well yourself, whether it's

baking bread, whether it's skiing, whether it's writing" (2011). Small moments are not something that our students have heard much of, or have been pointed out to them. Thus, in order for them to be able to successfully write small moments, they need to hear lots of small moments. According to Fletcher, "every writer, no matter how skilled you are or how beginning you are, encounters and reads something that can lift and inform and infuse their own writing (2011). Though we can tell students to use dialogue, thought shots, or personal action, using mentor texts gives examples to students of what this looks like and how to utilize it so that they can incorporate it into their own writing. While the Calkin's program utilizes mentor texts, what I found was their suggestions were too advanced for my students. Because the writing of these mentor texts was so much higher than my students writing, such as the writing in A Chair for my Mother, my students were not able to pull much out of the text and utilize it in their own writing. When I used more age appropriate mentor texts in my classroom as well as previous students' work, I found that my students were frequently referring back to these texts to help them with their writing or telling me they added something to their text just like one of our mentor text authors did. They were also coming up to me with other texts and pointing out different strategies that I have taught them, showing me a deeper understanding of a given topic. They then were transferring their knowledge to their own writing using strategies to add detail that brought their stories to life.

The biggest area lacking in the Lucy Calkin's unit on personal narrative is teaching children how to add details to their writing. According to Hillocks, "the problem is that teachers do not spend time teaching the strategies that enable writers to generate the kinds of concrete detail that make writing effective" (pg.9). Before teaching strategies to my students, I often felt frustrated with my students' lack of details. I read them mentor texts, and pointed out the great details, but only my higher achieving students were adding more detail. What I discovered is that my first graders do not understand what details are. Reading to their partners helped them to become aware of their audience and give them ideas of what to add to their stories, but they didn't know how. Thus, I found that in order to have my students writing the stories I want them to, I had to create lessons that teach my students how to add dialogue, inner thought (thought shots as I call them), setting, and what I call show don't tell. Hillock's agrees that these are important skills to teach during a narrative unit, but what he always found was that giving examples and praising specifics on the rare occasion had little or no effect and only helped the writers who were already flourishing (pg. 11). Thus, when teaching these lessons, I give my students opportunities to help me write these details and I encouraged them to include them in their own writing. While not every student was able to apply all four strategies to all of their pieces of writing, I soon found my lowest students adding

dialogue and thought shots. Thus, improvement was being made and my students were creating knew schema on narratives that would help them the following year once they had more skills and practice.

My main goal as a teacher is to meet the needs of all of my students. Using only the Lucy Calkin's program helped my high students flourish but did nothing for my lower achieving students. Thus, I felt frustrated because what we are required to use was not helping me do my job. While I believe there are a lot of great pieces in the Calkin's program and I do and will continue to follow her main ideas, I believe that adding the lessons on prewriting, goal setting, specific strategies, and adding more age appropriate mentor texts will help my students write better personal narratives and thus score better on writing tests as well as be better more aware readers of personal narratives. You can read through all of my lessons and planning sheets that I have attached.

Works Cited

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My Small Moment

Who was there?

Where was it?

Small Moment

When was it?

What happened?

Show Don't Tell

Connection: We have been talking about how important it is for us as a writer to make our readers feel like they were there when a story happened by adding lots of details. We can add details to show our readers how we felt instead of just telling them.

Teaching: Maxton is working on a story about his birthday party and how he was so happy he got a new Lego set. He just wrote, "I got a Lego set. I was so happy." He told us how he felt. Writers, instead, try to use words that show the reader how you felt. So Maxton is going to try to find the words to show, not tell, that he was happy. To do this, he needs to think back to that day and make a movie in his head to remember exactly what he *did*.

(Write story on the board) Ask Maxton to come to the front of the room and to show us what he did when he saw what was inside his present. Then ask the children to watch and turn and talk with a partner about what they noticed Maxton was doing. Share some ideas. Take what the students said and add it to the story to show them how to use show don't tell. Ex. I got a Lego Set. I got a big smile on my face. I jumped up and down and threw my hands up in the air. "Yes!" I yelled.

Active Engagement: I'm going to write another story on the board. You are going to help me show how I was feeling instead of just telling. "I went to my soccer game. My team lost. I was sad." Have the students suggest ways to revise story to add show, don't tells.

Link: Remember when you go off to work today that you can use describing words to show how you feel instead of telling. You can also go back to old stories and revise by adding show, don't tells like we did with Maxton's work.

Dialogue

Connection: Writers, I have been noticing that a lot of you have been adding speech bubbles to your drawings. To add more detail to your stories, you can put what you wrote in your speech bubbles into your writing. When you write what your characters say in your writing, this is called dialogue.

Teach: Do you remember in my small moment I wrote about Lola was crying? I could have written, "Lola began to cry." But instead, I had Lola say the words she yelled for me. Listen, "Wahhh. Mommy. Mommy. Come!" Just that tiny bit of dialogue adds to my story. It makes a reader feel like they were there listening in on our conversation. To add dialogue, you write what you want to say in between these two lines called quotation marks. They go at the beginning of what you say and at the end so the reader knows exactly which words were spoken.

Active Engagement: Let's look at one of the stories we wrote together to see if we could add dialogue. Let me read it, and you will think whether I could add the actual words someone said. Listen.

One day during science, Bella picked up a beetle.
The beetle crawled across the palm of her hand.
She got scared and dropped the beetle on the floor.
The beetle was crawling on the floor and Mrs. Haynes was trying to catch it.
Everyone was screaming because they were scared.
Mrs. Haynes caught it and put it back in the terrarium.

Have the class brainstorm ideas of where they could add dialogue and add it to the story. Then reread the story with the added dialogue.

Link: When you go work on your stories today, reread some stories you have written and see if there is a place in that story where you might add dialogue. Ask yourself "What was I saying? What did the person say?" You may decide not to add any, and that's okay. Remember that you can write what is in your speech bubbles in your story. Dialogue makes the reader feel like they were really there.

Setting

Connection: Writers, I have loved getting a glimpse into your lives through reading your small moments. After I am done reading them, sometimes I am left wondering about a few things such as, when did this happen and where did this happen. Where something happened and when something happened is called the setting.

Teach: Have you ever wanted to learn how to do something like draw a picture or play a sport and then watched someone who knew what they were doing to figure out how to do it yourself? Let's do that now. Because we want to learn how to write great stories, let's look at what some of the authors we know do to start a great story. Read the leads from: . After, turn and talk with your partner about what you notice. How do these stories start? Turn and talk and then have a few share. Reiterate and clarify what the authors have done that I hope my students with emulate when they are writing their stories.

Active Engagement: Writers, we saw that instead of just starting the story with the action, some writers start with the setting to let the reader now right away where and when their story is taking place. I want you to listen when I read the lead to one of Sam's stories, and

see if you can come up with a suggestion for how Sam might add to his beginning. Read story:

I went on a rollercoaster.

It was scary.

It was fast.

I had fun.

If Sam were going to revise his lead and start by telling the setting, would could he say?

Link: Today when you are writing your stories and reading some stories you have already written, think about how you might start/revise your story using what we learned today. You might look at other books and notice other good ideas for leads.

Thought Shot

Connection: We have been learning about a lot of different ways to add details to our stories. We have learned about adding dialogue, setting, and show, don't tells. Today we are going to learn another way to add details to our stories that make our stories come to life for our readers. You can have the reader get into your head and see what you are thinking by adding thought shots into your stories. Thought shots when you tell your reader what is going on in your head, what you were thinking.

Teaching: A few years ago I had a student who wrote this funny small

moment story that I am going to share with you. (put writing on projector and read story) This student could have ended the story with "And I got away with it." But instead, the writer let us know what he was thinking at the moment by using a thought shot. He said, "I wonder what I will do next?" The word wonder lets the reader know that he did not say it aloud, but he was thinking it in his head. It makes us feel like we are becoming the character. When you are writing your story, think about what you might have been feeling during when this happened or what you might have been thinking.

Active Engagement: I have a book, When Benny was Lost. Pamela Mayer uses a lot of thinking and feeling. She uses words in the story that clue the reader what someone is feeling or thinking like my former student did with the word wonder in his story. Listen to the story as I read. Raise your hand when you hear a word that cues you that someone is thinking or feeling. (Write words on chart paper that says Thought Shots) After story, add additionally words the children can think of

Link: Today when you are writing, think about your story and make a movie in your mind. What were you thinking when your story was happening? You can use our Thought Shot chart to help you include thought shots in your writing.

Mentor Texts

- *Salt Hands* by Jane Chelsea Aragon
- *Fireflies* by Julie Brinckloe
- *Shortcut* by Donald Crews
- *Sheila Rae's Peppermint Stick* by Kevin Henkes
- *Wemberly's Ice Cream Star* by Kevin Henkes

My Writing Goals

Date	Writing Goal	Evidence Date	Date Accomplished

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There are supposed to be vertical lines dividing the evidence date section into many columns.